



Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA

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*Office of the
Archbishop*

Dear Friends in Christ:

Our Nation mobilizes for unprecedented action against worldwide terrorism. It is my hope to reflect on what might lie ahead especially as it will almost certainly involve military action.

First, I wish to commend and thank our chaplains of all Services for their immediate and most effective response to the tragedy at the Pentagon as well as in New York. Active duty and now reserve chaplains are on hand around the clock in morgues and counseling centers and amid the rubble, offering strong and compassionate witness to God's presence in the darkest moments. Their efforts will be called upon for many weeks to come and we assure them of our prayers in support.

And new challenges await all of us.

Our President has warned us that the war ahead will be protracted, widespread and costly. Surely, we must have international cooperation on a grand scale. Sixty-two countries lost citizens in last week's infernos. Over 50 countries, including our own, are said to have terrorist webs often deeply imbedded into their landscapes, almost invisible. Their dominant motive is hatred. Their overriding goal is to kill and maim and intimidate in order to instill general fear and ultimate capitulation. Their intense, fanatical determination is heedless of traditional values of right and wrong. Indeed, they personify evil and if not rooted out they will perpetrate similar and even more heinous crimes than the outrages of September 11. We have an obligation to respond as forcefully as necessary, even if it requires military action as a last resort to curb and eliminate such terrorism.

Our Nation's motives need not arise from the backlash of anger stirred by last week's attacks. Neither is it our purpose to retaliate "against terrorism with terrorism," or to inflict punishment in retribution for the evil we have suffered. We will be acting out of a reasonable obligation of immediate and long-range self-defense.

That our President and his advisors seem to have been quite deliberate in their lengthy meetings all week, seeking to be comprehensive before announcing a plan or taking action, is a positive indication that we will not be reacting rashly. Whatever the plan there should be reasonable hope of success. Political, diplomatic and economic initiatives must be integral to any victory, from start to completion. If military intervention is unavoidable, how fortunate is America to have a military with strength and power, with courage and with conscience.

Any potential military response must be responsible, taking into play the principles of any just war, lest we become unwitting barbarians in attempting to end barbarism. To the extent possible all innocent life should be spared, never the direct object of a military strike. Conflict must be focused as closely as possible on those who have instigated or cooperated in the dastardly destruction of September 11 and on others prepared to act similarly. Corresponding to a nation's concern for the life of its military is an obligation to protect the innocent on any given side of the conflict.

At the root of all biblically based moral teaching is the unchangeable and universal fact that every human being is made in the image and likeness of God. From that fact, for many centuries has come the widely accepted principle that no one may directly take the life of an innocent person, whether in peace or war.

We are entering a new kind of battle and it is probable that new moral dilemmas will arise for which there is no pat solution. Combining the time-honored principles of just war with reason and a sensitive conscience will help us through. Again, it will be objected, the September 11 terrorists had no concern for morality, reason or conscience. And again, we must reply; that is what distinguishes us from the barbarians, and that is the reason we must engage in this battle.

We will never eliminate evil from our midst. Without an ongoing turning to God on the part of individuals and communities, with an ear open to His will, evil will continue to gain the upper hand. All of us must pray for the guidance that our leaders do what is right, and for the resolution of our Nation and the whole free world to persevere.

The souls of thousands of dead and injured, in New York, at the Pentagon and in Pennsylvania, however, do cry out for justice. We are obliged to respond.

Lives of families and loved ones, shaken to their very roots by this abomination, deserve evidence of our love and solidarity. This we owe them.

And the many thousands who continue to labor long hours in the ruins and rubble of death should be assured, soon, that they labor not in vain. Let us show them our resolve as convincingly as they are evidencing theirs.

A special, closing word to the family members of the victims of the Pentagon attack. You continue to preach to us. Those that lost their lives in the Pentagon gave daily witness to a culture of self-sacrifice rare in the world. You, their families, continue that witness by your concern for one another even in the midst of your personal grief. It is evidenced as well by your willingness to continue, and to contribute to the challenging task ahead in honor of those who have already paid the great price.

Please know that your Church and your Nation love and admire you, support and encourage you.

Finally, we do not know what future days and months hold in store for us. We trust in God's Providence, entrust the good men and women of our Armed Forces to Him, and pray for His ongoing guidance.

In the Lord,

// Signed //

Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien
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